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TITLE: The Heritage Method ©: A Systemic Model for the Successful Implementation of the Character-Based Abstinence-Only Paradigm

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ISSUE: A national debate is currently underway concerning the efficacy of character-based, abstinence-only sex education as a primary prevention intervention to prevent sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and unwanted or unintended pregnancies. Although criticized by those favoring contraceptive-based approaches, abstinence-only education programs have not been evaluated adequately (Kirby, 1997), so statements regarding their effectiveness cannot be made decisively at this time. This presentation describes a systemic model for the successful implementation of the abstinence-only paradigm that is based on behavioral, cognitive, affective, assets-building and psychosocial theory. Incorporated into all components of the program is the stage theory of behavior change described by Prochaska, DiClemente and Norcross (1992). First year evaluation results will be presented.

SETTING: The program is set in public schools in ten of forty-six counties in South Carolina, social service agencies, the faith community and conferences involving traditional African American community leadership.

PROJECT: Heritage Community Services received \$1.3 million in Title V funding to provide the following intervention components in South Carolina: (1) a one-week character-based, abstinence-only sex education program emphasizing anatomy and physiology, healthy relationships, STD risks, the benefits of marriage, decision-making and refusal skills, self-control and personal responsibility; (2) a year long school-based character-education maintenance program emphasizing internal assets building and positive peer and adult support; (3) a community education program based on the stage theory of behavior change; and (4) a series of workshops for the African American community designed to educate, build consensus, and empower community leaders to find ways to support the concept of abstinence-outside-of marriage.

RESULTS: Data from the sex education component indicates that attitudes supportive of abstinence were increased across age, gender and race and that these attitudes were related to self-reported abstinence from sexual activity. Qualitative data indicates that the character groups are serving to increase cohesiveness among peers, improve classroom behavior and increase student's self-efficacy regarding remaining abstinent.

LESSONS LEARNED: Heritage's experience thus far shows that this intervention can produce positive changes in abstinence supportive attitudes and that these attitudes are related to actual self-reported behavior among adolescents regardless of age, race or gender. Further, adolescents are capable of learning that their emotions and behavior are under their own control and that they are capable of controlling their sexual behavior when provided with supportive adults and programs. Finally, parents, principals, teachers and students have enthusiastically received this approach.

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